

PROPOSING A FACILITATED PARTICIPATORY APPROACH FOR SOUTHEAST ASIAN MINORITY LANGUAGE ORTHOGRAPHY DESIGN

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Abstract

In strongly hierarchical societies, ownership of and involvement in community-related projects often is linked to the social status of individual community members and external specialists, rather than the community as a whole. This paper therefore proposes a hybrid approach to integrate participatory strategies and a significant degree of outsider input in orthography development in Southeast Asian hierarchical societies. Proposing this mixed approach of combining linguistically optimal ‘autonomous’ orthography design and local ownership-oriented participatory methods is based on previously described procedures in orthography development as well as the author’s own observations while consulting on Latin- and Brahmi-based minority language orthographies in Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos.

Keywords: Orthography design, community involvement, participatory research, autonomous orthography, resilience linguistics

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1 Introduction

Successful literacy and education programs in multilingual environments build on the learner’s familiarity with the language of instruction, which is why development of endangered languages is needed to not only preserve their heritage languages and cultures but also grant basic quality education for ethnic minority members. The goal of orthography design in minority language development is that the resulting orthography will be accepted and used by the local community in their literacy development efforts. Ownership and involvement by local communities is needed to ensure the acceptance, sustainability and therefore effectiveness of literacy practices (see Casquite & Young 2017).

Community involvement is desired as it ensures that any initiated development-related efforts will be carried out by communities after outsiders partially or fully withdraw to further self-sufficiency of local communities. However, the degree of active community participation does not only depend on the perceived value of language development but also on the social structure of a participating community. Several sociocultural studies have shown Southeast Asian societies to tend towards strong hierarchical structures (cf. Rigg 1991; Mehmet 1997; Adger 1997; Blunt & Turner 2005; Seekins 2005; Dorming 2006; Bouté 2007; Wischermann 2010; Geng et al. 2015). And although social structures of ethnic minorities in Southeast Asia may differ considerably from their respective national society, accountability and responsibility generally appears to be more or less linked to status (cf. Davison 2002 for China). A local community’s level of self-motivation in new practices often is low, reflected in the traditionally teacher-centered educational systems of Southeast Asian societies (cf. Abanador et al. 2014; Pagram & Pagram 2005; Littlewood 1999).

In strongly hierarchical societies, the accountability and responsibility that come with ownership of and involvement in community-related projects like the design of an orthography is more or less linked to the social status of individual community members and external specialists, rather than the community as a whole. This paper therefore proposes a hybrid approach to integrate participatory strategies and significant

degree of outsider input in orthography development in Southeast Asian hierarchical societies. This mixed approach of combining autonomous orthography design and participatory methods is based on previously described procedures in orthography development and the author's own observations while working with external linguists helping local Mainland Southeast Asian minority communities develop Latin- and Brahmi-based orthographies in Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos.¹

2 Background: Outsider vs. insider involvement

Orthography can be viewed as a “set of *practices* engaged in by writers as they try to represent a language for which no conventional written representation exists” (Sebba 1998:2), not just as a matter of language *planning*. Within the autonomous approach, orthographic choices are based on phonological accuracy and learnability and thus heavily depend on specialist input by outsiders. Orthographic practice within the community of users, however, may differ from an ideologically neutral orthography approach that acknowledges only linguistic and educational guidelines. It depends on ideological matters regarding identity and power where particular orthographic symbols and/or spelling rules may have positive or negative connotations, and also on cultural factors such as the perceived aesthetics of symbols, even though they may be optimal for text processing and readability. For example, groups may choose orthographies to either set themselves apart from or identify with a larger, more powerful group – even though the chosen writing system, such as Latin script for expansive Austroasiatic sound systems or Tibeto-Burman suprasegmental inventories, may not be “ideal” from a technical point of view. Thus spelling or script choice reflect a community's cultural or political identity, which may not be reflected in autonomous orthographies (cf. Sebba 2007; Villa 2015). However, in many “participatory approaches” (such as Page 2013, Roberts 2017), the outside facilitator is still assumed – in all cases except where the community truly internally developed their own orthography prior to any connection with outside support.

Due to the lack of involvement and ownership by the local community in the development of autonomous orthographies, they are considered less effective than community-based orthographies. Participatory research is a way to involve local communities in language development and further their self-determination to ensure they can identify with their orthography and are more likely to use it. According to Stoecker (1997), the three goals for local community development are knowledge, efficiency, and supportive relationships within and outside of the local community. Reaching these goals requires four roles to be filled: animator, organizer, educator, and participatory researcher. All of these four roles are meant to help the community benefit from knowledge, efficiency and supportive relationships. In order to fill these roles, the *goal(s)* of a particular project, the *academic skills* offered to members of the local community, and the needed or wanted *community participation* need to be determined. The functions of academics in participatory research are not decision making but mainly to (a) initiate, (b) consult and (c) collaborate. Examples for these three functions in a facilitated participatory approach for orthography development will be illustrated in section 4.

As mentioned in the introduction, ownership of and involvement in community-related projects in strongly hierarchical societies often is linked to the social status of individual community members and external specialists, rather than the community as a whole. An example for decision-making in hierarchical societies is found for Eastern Lawa in Thailand (Karan 2014). The Thai-script based Western Lawa orthography was created for mainly non-literate speakers; it reflects the Western Lawa phoneme inventory and did not consider reading skill transfer to Thai. Two generations later, the Eastern Lawa orthography was created for a community that was literate in Thai already. When an external consultant aimed for a harmonization of Eastern and Western Lawa orthographies, the Eastern Lawa speakers refused this because they wanted to follow Standard Thai phoneme-grapheme correspondences. Since this resulted in an underrepresentation of the extensive Lawa diphthong system (for Lawa phonology, see Munn 2017a), it was suggested to double the diphthong grapheme inventory by modifying the existing Thai diphthong graphemes with a Pali dot, alien to Thai script, which the community did not dismiss. However, the orthography has not been established yet (Blok 2013; Munn 2017b), indicating that the suggestions made by the outside specialists were neither rejected nor fully accepted.

¹ I wish to thank Christina J. Page, Kwantlen Polytechnic University, for our fruitful collaboration in the past and for her input on the present paper.

Community decision-making is heavily influenced by local leaders, external facilitators, and by government representatives. For example, locals who have gone abroad and returned with the intent to develop their own communities generally obtain a higher social status in their communities and thus may be more inclined to exclude their communities from the decision-making process of orthographic development, resulting in an autonomous orthography coming from an insider of the community (community-internal non-participatory). The same is true where language development is not necessarily initiated by the government or by other outsiders; often the village head or a religious leader may decide on symbol inventory and spelling rules, which may or may not truly be accepted by the community members. Participatory orthography development involves the understanding of a community's needs and wishes, and how decisions within a community are made (Casquite & Young 2017). In a highly hierarchical environment this places emphasis on the role of the linguist/academic as a relator and even mediator, an appropriate role in the Asian context. Therefore, the initiating, consulting and collaborating functions of an academic in participatory research may have to be expanded in orthography development in Southeast Asian hierarchical societies. Examples for involvement of academics in facilitated participatory orthography design in hierarchical systems are given in the following case studies.

Based on insights gained from orthography development for Khasi, Garo, Dimasa, Garbi, Mizo and Manipuri in North India, Pappuswamy (2017) recommends orthography development committees. These include L1 speakers representing various dialects and age groups as well as local community leaders (insider involvement), and trained specialists as well as government representatives to monitor the application of national language policy guidelines (outsider involvement). Roberts (2014) describes professional networking in orthography development in the African context for Kabiye in Togo, also a hierarchical society (Essizewa 2010), and recommends this approach for any linguistic advisor. Based on interviews with stakeholders, Roberts develops a relational model of orthography development and identifies social relationships between learners (insiders), practitioners (teachers may be insiders or outsiders), facilitators (the linguist or educator as an outsider), policy stakeholders, and a local language committee as the decision maker. The linguist engaged in orthography development must understand the social environment in order to successfully interact with all five spheres, not only applying linguistic expertise but also supporting the social and political skills needed by all involved parties. In the Asian context, the hierarchical structure involves a sixth sphere in addition to those identified by Roberts (2014), the one of local leaders (Pappuswamy 2017).

While the goal of any developmental work is encouraging self-sufficiency, the social circumstances in Southeast Asia require additional direct effort by outside researchers. Academic skills offered by an outsider such as a linguist and/or educator are phonological analysis, establishing appropriate phoneme-grapheme correspondences to result in a shallow reader-friendly orthography (Katz & Frost 1992), and sociolinguistic awareness in orthography-related decision-making. Consulting to the point of teaching what the community must know, rather than letting them find out for themselves, equips the local community to make well-informed decisions. Community consultation and participation are the main tools for sustainable literacy projects (Casquite & Young 2017), but in a hierarchical society, full understanding of hierarchical structures and the process of decision making by the consulting academic is necessary for successful professional networking, building of trust and mediating in concerns that community members may not word, or not express clearly enough.

3 Resilience linguistics

Bradley (2010) coins the term *resilience linguistics* as he applies the social-ecological approach of resilience thinking (Folke et al. 2010) to linguistic environmental factors causing language endangerment.² The widely-held assumption that the use of a local language may interfere with national language learning can discourage parents from using their native language with their children. Bradley argues that language and culture documentation counteracts this development and illustrates language development practices for Gong, Thailand, and for Lisu in China, Burma, Thailand, and India. Active measures of external specialists

² According to Folke et al. (2010), resilience in natural resource management implies persistence throughout continuous change and adaptation within critical thresholds. Adaptation as a facet of resilience is the ability to respond to external change and internal processes, which allows for stable development. Transformability utilizes experience and knowledge in social-ecological transitions.

are providing help with suitable materials development, training and motivating local community members, and serving as an advocate for local language development. For the Gong community, the heritage language is not spoken at home any longer but has been replaced by Thai, despite of external language development support and community involvement. For the multi-lingual Lisu communities, however, Lisu is still vital. It is not being replaced by but added to other languages. Gradual linguistic divergence due to language contact was put to a hold by the creation of a Roman-based Lisu orthography in 1915, supported by external technological assistance. The standardized literary Lisu variety, which may differ from non-formal speech, is a dialectal compromise and shows some innovations on both written and oral level. This standardized Lisu variety allows literate speakers across all dialects to become aware of and understand dialectal differences, which, in turn, makes the Lisu language even more resilient. Effective orthography development, supporting a positive attitude towards a community's heritage language, and the acknowledgement that languages generally undergo change (language contact does not lead to any 'defective' variety) contribute to language and culture maintenance.

Resilience linguistics as promoted by Bradley (2010) is not truly participatory. It portrays the linguist as a consultant, facilitator and mediator who is actively and practically involved in all of the five spheres of Robert's (2014) relational model of orthography development. Resilience linguistics acknowledges the four roles animator, organizer, educator, and participatory researcher to reach Stoecker's (1997) local community's development goals of knowledge, efficiency, and supportive relationships. However, the local community's attitude towards their own language may have to be improved, and the aforementioned low self-motivation regarding new projects as well as the teacher-centered nature of local Asian communities has to be taken into account. Therefore, the linguist is very likely to have to fill more than the one role of the participatory researcher laid out in Stoecker (1997) but will have to animate, organize and educate to a certain degree as well. As Bradley (2010) points out, members of a community will ultimately make their own choices, and language development does not warrant a language's survival. But a realistic approach that acknowledges socio-cultural practices and attitudes will lessen the threat of language death.

As described by Bradley (2010), many orthographies in Mainland Southeast Asia are developed with significant outsider input. Given the largely negative connotations of the idea of an autonomous orthography, this paper proposes a facilitated participatory approach. The following section summarizes this mixed approach as observed and applied by the author while working with external linguists helping local Mainland Southeast Asian minority communities develop Latin- and Brahmi-based orthographies in Thailand, Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos.

4 Neither autonomous nor community-based

Effective orthography development is a multi-layered process with linguistic, socio-cultural, educational and political facets. Helping members of a local community to develop their own writing system therefore requires specialists' input, awareness of language policy guidelines, and incorporation of the community's preferences. In order to provide the desired knowledge, efficiency and supportive relationships, an academic may have to act more as a superior supervisor than a peer participant. This way, community members can develop trust in the capabilities of their consultant and are more likely open to receive the needed guidance. In addition, members of a community who are not in any leadership position need to be explicitly made aware that they have the freedom to participate in decision-making and provide input or request modifications or changes whenever they feel it is needed.

This author had a positive experience in this regard during a five-day workshop in March 2014 for Thai script-based orthography development for several minority communities.³ The Lahu participants (preschool teachers) under the author's care initially followed the instructions given in the mornings and tried to apply them on their own. When they were hesitant, the author made several suggestions, often explaining the underlying linguistic reason in a simplified way, and repeatedly pointed out that the suggested graphemes could be changed if they did not make sense or did not 'look good'. Towards the end of the week, the participants freely discussed choices with each other and made suggestions to the author.

Another approach the author has taken was presenting a Lao-based orthography based on the author's phonological analysis to a small Louma community in Laos in 2013, where an international NGO is developing a bilingual preschool. An external educator presented the suggested graphemes and spelling

³ Hosted by the Foundation of Applied Linguistics under the Office of Basic Education, Ministry of Education.

rules, and the community started using the suggested orthography. In 2016, this author then visited the community on-site for further verification of the existing phonological analysis, adjustment of the orthography, and phonics instruction. The local literacy workers who were trained by the NGO tried out the proposed orthography and were instructed to voice their opinion. They accepted some graphemes, disliked others, which were then changed until they were content. They learned in which way the inventory and use of the suggested symbols, symbol combinations and diacritics could be adjusted, and over the coming months and years, the members of the community revised their orthography entirely on their own.

Due to its hybrid nature, the approach described below may be called facilitated participatory (FP) orthography design. There are at least two scenarios for FP orthographies. One is an orthography developed by an outsider. The second one is an existing orthography that was developed by a community and has been requested to be examined and revised by an outsider, as in the example of Laitu Chin in Myanmar below. The three roles of initiation, consultation and collaboration that academics in a participatory approach hold are illustrated in the following three sections.

A. Initiation

- (1) A consulting academic (linguist and literacy specialist) collects and analyses phonological (and possibly morphological) data to describe the sound inventory and word formation processes. In areas where bilingual education is still in the process of being developed, local communities may not value education in their mother tongue and want to focus on the national language or a more prestigious language of wider communication. In order to motivate them, the participating community needs to be informed that learning to read and write in their own language first will help their children to learn speaking, reading and writing the national language or any other language of wider communication (Skutnabb-Kangas & Heugh 2013; Mohanty 2006; Cenoz & Genesee 1998). The aim is for the community to know and appreciate that this is a means for their children to be able to both develop their heritage language and also attend a governmental school and receive better education and a higher status in both their own and the national/dominant society.
- (2) The academic helps the local community to thoughtfully consider the influence of both linguistic and sociolinguistic factors on their orthographic choices. Regarding script choice, the consulting academic provides the benefits and disadvantages of Latin-based alphabets in comparison to Brahmi-based alphasyllabaries or other writing systems used/encouraged/required by the government. The academic informs the community about governmental regulations regarding script choice.
- (3) The consulting academic either creates an orthography based on the chosen script (see Louma in section 4) or, more commonly, leads an initially chosen committee/group through a structured process of selecting initial grapheme choices based on the previously conducted phonological analysis. Even with the presentation of a provisional orthography, this is a highly scaffolded process in which the community explores and decides on suitable symbols. Depending on language politics in individual countries, this may be based on the national script or on a script of the community's choice (for a description and discussion on deciding against the national script see Page, 2013). This process involves local or external educators, chosen community members, or a literacy committee formed by the community leadership in the very beginning.
- (4) An alternative scenario is that the community already has an orthography developed by a community member or a local institution but requires help with testing and refining the orthography in order to launch a literacy program.

An example for the initiating function of an academic in facilitated participatory orthography development is Laitu Chin, Myanmar. After a local Kachin missionary developed a Roman-based Laitu orthography in 1998, the community requested help from a language development organization. In 2003, the first literacy trainee attended an introductory linguistics class, and a team of young Laitu speakers attended a writer's workshop in 2006, using the existing orthography.

B. Consultation

- (1) The consulting academic explains the chosen phoneme-grapheme correspondences and provides a short glossary using the new orthography. The literacy committee consisting of community members

may or may not want to involve the broader community. The community members may focus on spoken sounds and will most likely not be aware of phonological processes. Awareness that the pronunciation of sounds depends on the context in a word or a sentence arises as the community practices writing different words using identical graphemes representing the same phoneme in differing contexts, and short sentences.

- (2) Both the consulting academic and chosen or volunteering paid community members write more words and discuss orthographic choices such as digraphs, special symbols or augmentation. The consulting academic explains which choices are most likely more reader-friendly. The community may raise aesthetic concerns and most likely has strong ideas of what choices are cell-phone friendly.
- (3) The community starts testing the orthography by writing sentences and short paragraphs. They consult with the consulting academic regarding problems based on underlying morphophonemics, grammaticalization of tone and phonation, tone sandhi, or other phonological challenges. The linguist provides non-technical explanations and suggests methods to resolve the issues. The local community makes provisional choices and is encouraged to continue testing the system through application, such as primers, literacy classes, small books, and so on.

The consulting function in a facilitated participatory approach is illustrated with Laitu Chin again. This author was asked to perform a phonological analysis and revise the existing orthography since its spelling was inconsistent and it could not be read fluently. Based on a phonological analysis and an evaluation of phoneme-grapheme correspondences in the existing orthography draft, two additional vowel graphemes were recommended. This revised orthography draft was presented and discussed during a literacy workshop in 2007, where the Laitu committee also changed some graphemic representations for Laitu to resemble Roman-based Burmese. Inconsistent letter combinations used in digraphs led to ambiguities or confusion in the reading of compounds and affixed words. Even though this reduced the fluency in reading, the committee decided to use syllable breaks instead of changing the digraphs because to them, the existing digraphs looked better than the suggested ones. This is a good example of facilitated participation; it is more important for the community to accept an orthography than for the orthography to be technically optimal.

C. Collaboration

- (1) The consulting academic provides instructions for independent further application of the orthography, such as expanding an existent glossary, writing short texts as captions in acted-out short stories with photos, providing texts for hand-drawn picture books regarding their own history, culture or life style, or other printed picture books in any language, writing texts based on oral narration (e.g. proverbs, folktales, history).
- (2) The consulting academic stays in touch with the community and checks on them, provides possible solutions regarding spacing, punctuation, hyphenation, line breaks and other text-processing issues and points out possible alternatives. The community makes decisions to move towards increased standardization.
- (3) The consulting academic collaborates with the educators in the community as needed. Further testing of the orthography is done on the spot, for which the linguist may be consulted. At this point, if there are problems with ease of reading or spelling inconsistencies, the need for more structured community testing arises, with the support from an outside literacy specialist.

Laitu Chin literacy development is a good example for successful collaboration with external specialists. Receiving input and guidance from the assigned consulting academics whenever desired, the Laitu literacy and culture committee revised the orthography and created an orthography guide, which was continuously revised as the community applied and tested the orthography. In 2013, the orthography was revised again to comprise three Laitu varieties. The Laitu Chin Literature and Culture Committee has been proud to promote their literature ever since.

5 Scope of the facilitated participatory approach

In the proposed facilitated participatory approach for orthography development, the consulting academic may have to pay special tribute to the community's leadership and involve them in the decision-making

process. Due to the strongly hierarchical structure of some Southeast Asian communities, this can lead to decisions that are not supported by the broader community; the resulting orthography is *community-internal non-participatory*, possibly not paying respect to the community's desire to identify with their orthography. Similarly, a *facilitated participatory* orthography may be altered by the government if the government does not agree with the orthographic choices, leading to an *community-external non-participatory* orthography. Being capable of specific academic reasoning, however, the involvement of an external academic can actually further the case of particular orthographic choices by the local community the government might want to reject otherwise. This was the case for the Khmer-based orthography of Jarai in Cambodia. Initially, the governmental representatives rejected the proposed <r> grapheme for a velar approximant rhotic in favor of a close back vowel symbol because it did not sound like an 'r'. In the second instance, correspondences to French orthography laid out by the linguist and an explanation of the inconsistencies caused by using a vowel symbol for a rhotic consonant caused the proposed <r> grapheme to be accepted.

Facilitated participatory orthography design does not necessarily prevent community-internal or community-external non-participatory orthographies, due to the strong influence of local and national leaders; it gives a local minority community the guidance and knowledge they need to make informed decision, enhances efficiency since this approach circumvents any lack of self-motivation regarding new practices, and helps build supportive relationships within the local hierarchical framework. It allows for hierarchy-conscious decision-making at the community level, involving community members, community leadership, internal or external educators, and the consulting academic. The required roles of the animator, organizer, educator, and participatory researcher (Stoecker 1997) to accomplish the community's developmental goals are not fixed but depend on individual communities' hierarchical structures, group dynamics of literacy committees, educators and the external academic, involvement of NGOs and the government.

The advantage of this approach is that the local community does not become overwhelmed with decision making regarding unfamiliar topics, and that they can act according to the norms of their hierarchical social structure. The community receives guidance and recommendations but is involved in decision making, while the consulting linguist avoids pressuring the members of the community to make uninformed decisions. The consulting academic is able to mediate in matters where the local community may initially follow outsiders' suggestions or guidelines but never develop their own set of orthography practices due to lack of insider acceptance. This may be related to the standardization of an orthography, openness towards borrowing and language change, graphematic choices, the desire to directly transfer L1 reading skills to spelling rules of the national language even though it may be linguistically less consistent, or to create distance from the dominant language via script choice or spelling rules.

6 Conclusions

Community involvement ensures sustainable language development carried out by local communities after outsiders partially or fully withdraw. In orthography development, community involvement is considered more important than outside specialist input because 'autonomous' orthographies focus on phonological accuracy and learnability, not a community's cultural or political identity. However, developmental work in Southeast Asian hierarchical structures has its particular challenges: these are the association of accountability and responsibility with status, and also the low level of self-motivation in new practices in their traditionally teacher-centered educational systems. Therefore, it is suggested to consider heightening the degree and duration of outsider involvement in language development in this area. This requires that the consulting academic may have to fill the roles of both mentor and mediator, sensitive to decision-making processes and any of the community's possibly covert attitudes and needs. The actual amount of academic consultant help depends on individual circumstances, such as the community's attitude towards their own language, towards multilingualism, and towards the perceived need for literacy development in their heritage language.

Based on previous case studies and the author's own experience, this paper suggests a *facilitated participatory* approach for orthography design in combining (a) linguistically and educationally sound orthography design and literacy practices through varying levels of external academic involvement and (b) participatory methods to further acceptability and sustainability, while it places additional focus on (c) the mentoring and mediating role of the consulting academic. As such, facilitated participation is neither a top-

down nor bottom-up method. This mixed approach aims to build linguistic resilience and ensure basic education in familiar or heritage languages of minority language community members.

The main intent of this paper is to raise more awareness and consideration and application of the ideas presented in this paper, as some of the suggested methods may not have been considered in previous attempts at helping minority groups develop orthographies in the hierarchical Southeast Asian context. Thus, the area of facilitated participatory methods in language development needs more study in regard to application and impact.

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